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Being Yasir Arafat: A Portrait of Palestine's President

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Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography

By Barry Rubin, Judith Colp Rubin

New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 325, \$28.00

Yasir Arafat may be the most polarizing man alive today. To his detractors, he is an unscrupulous terrorist, responsible for the murders of thousands of innocent civilians; to his supporters, he is the embodiment of Palestinian nationalism and the person who placed the Palestinian cause on the world stage. Depending on one's vantage point, both the archterrorist and father-of-the-nation portrayals are accurate. But like all stereotypes, they tell us more about the person making the assertion than they do about the subject. Rare is the work on Arafat that is nuanced, objective, and analytic.

Two new biographies by Israeli scholars, unfortunately, do not stray from the depressing norm, painting Arafat solely, in the colorful language of one of the authors, Efraim Karsh, as a "bigoted and megalomaniacal extremist blinded by anti-Jewish hatred ... and profoundly obsessed with violence." Neither biography is without value. Their biggest contribution, however, is less to add to our knowledge about Arafat than to document the broad consensus about him now in place in Israel: that he is an incorrigible terrorist and liar who used the peace process as a "strategic deception" in his goal to destroy the Jewish state and who alone scuttled negotiations in order to launch a terror war. If one wants to understand why Israel will never again negotiate with Arafat, and why the Israeli government recently announced its formal intention to "remove" him, these books are a good place to start.

THE BLAND REVOLUTIONARY

Although Arafat has had a propensity to re-create his life story whenever convenient, the basics of his youth are well known. His parents had recently moved to Cairo from Palestine when he was born in 1929. Arafat periodically visited Jerusalem, but he was raised in Cairo, and to this day he speaks with an Egyptian accent. Although distantly related on his mother's side to the aristocratic Husseini family of Jerusalem, he was raised in modest surroundings more reminiscent of his father's Gazan upbringing. Arafat spent his early professional career as an engineer in Kuwait, where, in the late 1950s, he helped found what would later become the largest faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization, Fatah. His life as head of Fatah and then the PLO itself is also well known, including his long and troubled stints in Jordan (until 1971), Lebanon (until 1982), Tunisia (until 1994), and the West Bank and Gaza.

As for Arafat's ideology, almost all of his biographers agree that he has no guiding vision of a better society, no grand strategy, and that he views the world as a series of tactical challenges to be overcome. Although he is a self-styled "revolutionary," there has never been a socially transformative aspect to his world view. He is neither a Marxist believing in the efficacy of class struggle nor an Islamist advocating an austere view of the good polity nor even a true revolutionary nationalist in the mold of his own hero, Gamal Abdel al-Nasser, Egypt's nationalist president. Instead, Arafat appears to be someone who believes simply that his national group has superior claims to a small patch of land and who is dedicated to defeating those he sees as usurpers.

The blandness of Arafat's ideology reflects his urban, lower-middle-class origins. Fatah's Palestinian nationalism and the social origins of its leaders stood in sharp contrast to the pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s and the well-to-do Arab intellectuals who formulated it. In the internal Palestinian struggle over whether to advocate a separate Palestinian nationalism or be part of the larger pan-Arab movement, Arafat and the nationalists won, and Arafat's background helped thrust him past more glamorous figures into the leadership of the Palestinian national movement.

Arafat's advocacy of armed struggle should also be understood as in large part a byproduct of internal Palestinian politics. Violence was what urban toughs could offer that pan-Arabist cafe intellectuals could not; it was an ideological stick with which to beat up political rivals. The concept of armed struggle allowed diaspora Palestinian nationalism to be consolidated as a lower-middle-class national movement, and it is this formulation that has been at loggerheads since 1994 with the more urbane Palestinian nationalism that developed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

By not putting the history of the PLO's violence into context, Karsh and Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin render it a virtually unintelligible phenomenon. For them, violence and terror happen primarily because Arafat is an evil man who believes in the "absolute glorification of violence." But almost all nationalist movements have resorted to some degree of violence against their enemies. The PLO has not been unique in this regard, nor has Fatah been unique in using violence as part of its intracommunal maneuvering. Without in any way excusing horrible atrocities against civilians, it is crucial to understand the use of violence, even terror, in terms that go beyond a single individual.

TO OSLO AND BEYOND

Arafat's ideology is simplistic and, as his critics charge, may not really have changed over the years vis-a-vis Israel, but the same cannot be said of the broader Palestinian community. By far the most important ideological change in Palestinian nationalism over the past quarter century has been the transformation from advocating a Palestinian state in place of Israel to advocating a Palestinian state next to Israel. Not all Palestinians have adopted this change -- as we know from the pronouncements of Hamas and others -- but certainly most of those living in the West Bank and Gaza have. Polls consistently show that about 70 percent of Palestinians there want a two-state solution and believe in reconciliation with Israel after the Palestinian state is created. This is also the official policy of the PLO.

The transformation of the Palestinian national consensus has not been based on a growing recognition of Israel's intrinsic legitimacy, however. Even the most moderate peacenik Palestinian will always believe that the creation of Israel in 1948 constituted an historic injustice inflicted on the Palestinian people. But the strong international consensus

Being Yasir Arafat: A Portrait of Palestine's President Foreign Affairs

concerning the legitimacy of Israel within its 1967 borders and the legitimacy of a Palestinian state in the remaining 23 percent of historical Palestine has gradually convinced most Palestinians that this is their best shot at self-determination.

The Oslo peace process reflected and was supposed to capitalize on this transformation, but unfortunately it was designed in such a way as to make ultimate failure much more likely. It is an indication of the weakness of the Oslo structure that the Rubins and Karsh cannot even agree on where the process was supposed to lead. The Rubins repeatedly state, incorrectly, that Oslo mandated the creation of a Palestinian state. But no such final outcome can be found in any of the Oslo agreements. Karsh correctly identifies this weakness in Oslo, calling it "nothing short of mind-boggling" to have no final status goal toward which to work.

Oslo reflected the naive hope of its drafters that if Palestinians and Israelis focused for a few years on interim steps and confidence-building measures, then the really difficult issues at the heart of the conflict could be solved. Without a vision of what a final settlement would entail, however, Oslo merely gave rejectionists on both sides time to mobilize. Every minor mistake or missed deadline was portrayed as a sign of bad faith, part of the master conspiracy each side accused the other of perpetrating. By not laying out a two-state solution at the outset in 1993 -- when it was truly possible -- Arafat and especially then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin missed in their caution a rare historic opportunity to end the conflict.

The latest peace initiative -- the "road map" put forward by the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations -- corrects one of Oslo's two fatal flaws: it contains a clear vision of two states living side by side in peace. Lest anyone believe that separated Bantustans will be a credible substitute for a Palestinian state, it calls for an "independent and viable" Palestine based on the 1967 borders. But the road map repeats Oslo's mistake of drawing out the process of getting there into many steps and stages, which will allow each side to halt the process by alleging that the other has not fulfilled its latest commitment. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a lifelong opponent of Palestinian national aspirations, has proved a master at this tactic.

Oslo's structure also helped to encourage the dismal politics practiced by Arafat and the Palestinian Authority (PA) after 1994. Although neither biography focuses much on internal Palestinian politics, both note the pa's authoritarian and largely corrupt practices. Arafat was not the absolute dictator these authors suggest, but neither was he any democrat. Oslo allowed an external leadership to return to Palestine and consolidate its power over supportive but distinctive local elites. Karsh notes that there has been a fundamental political cleavage within Palestinian society under the pa -- not the PLO versus Hamas, but rather Arafat and his outsiders versus the West Bank and Gazan insiders. This same cleavage has been analyzed, in more nuanced form, by the Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki as one pitting an old guard against a new one. Still others describe it as the Oslo elite versus the new or intifada elite.

In its drive to consolidate power over a population with which it had many emotional and familial ties but no practical political experience, the Oslo elite needed to construct a politics that favored its brand of old-school urban thuggery over the locals' more modern and democratic sensibilities. As a result, the PA favored diktat over democracy, personalism over institutions, and corruption over good governance. And this "politics of antithesis," as I have called it elsewhere, did indeed, at least until the al Aqsa intifada, allow Arafat and his "Tunisian" allies to be remarkably successful in fragmenting and defeating their homegrown rivals.

'48 VERSUS '67

Both Karsh and the Rubins pin the failure of the July 2000 Camp David negotiations and the subsequent intifada squarely on Arafat. Indeed, it is conventional wisdom these days in Israel and even the United States that Israel made a generous offer to Arafat, who turned it down, failed to make any counteroffer, and went home to start a violent uprising. Efforts to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of what happened at that fateful summit -- where there was plenty of blame to go around -- have had only limited effect in displacing this narrative.

It is true that former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's proposal at Camp David -- to transfer 92 percent of the

Being Yasir Arafat: A Portrait of Palestine's President Foreign Affairs

West Bank and all of Gaza to a Palestinian state, along with some control over East Jerusalem -- stunned Israelis with its generosity. But it is important to remember that Arafat's rejection of the proposals was hugely popular among Palestinians. Explaining away the rejection simply as a product of Arafat's idiocy or venality, as so many authors do, does little to illuminate the deeper forces at work.

To accurately understand what happened at Camp David and later, one must keep in mind that Arafat and the Palestinians have approached negotiations with 1948 as their base date. Most Israelis, in contrast, now see the conflict as a territorial dispute over lands won in the 1967 war. In their view, actions that occurred prior to 1967 -- such as the creation of the initial wave of Palestinian refugees -- are non-negotiable, and raising such issues constitutes a challenge to Israel's very legitimacy.

From the Israeli perspective, accordingly, a willingness to cede over 90 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, including parts of Jerusalem, seems more than generous, and a willingness to evacuate settlements left on the Palestinian side of the border seems magnanimous. From the Palestinian perspective, however, Israel's refusal to entertain any serious discussion of "the right of return" for Palestinian refugees avoids the very core of the conflict. For Palestinians, moreover, recognizing Israel within its 1967 borders means formally ceding 77 percent of historical Palestine, and so Israeli quibbling over bits and pieces of the remaining 23 percent seems a sign of bad faith. One hardly needs to demonize Arafat, in short, to understand why the negotiations broke down just when the big issues were being raised.

The same is true for the two books' simplistic presentation of the al Aqsa intifada. For Karsh and the Rubins, this was a planned uprising orchestrated by a Machiavellian Arafat, who negotiated with Israel even while planning to unleash the dogs of war. Now there is no question that Arafat, to use former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami's phrase, "rode the tiger" of the intifada, trying to steer it as best he could to his advantage. There is also no question that Fatah cadres were mobilized in the first days of the uprising, something that could not have happened without Arafat's approval. And it is likely that the PLO had made contingency plans for renewed armed conflict -- as had Israel. None of this, however, fits the level of planning, organization, and intrigue attributed to Arafat and the Palestinians by the authors.

What is missing from these books is any sense of why average Palestinians might have reason for anger. One wonders whether the authors spent much time in the occupied territories during the 1990s, seeing firsthand how Palestinians actually experienced the peace process every day. Nowhere in the books is it mentioned that illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank doubled during the Oslo years, to include about 230,000 settlers. With each new settler unit came further confiscations of Palestinian lands, along with the building of "bypass roads" linking settlements to one another and to Israel.

Israel's policy of closing down the occupied territories -- an enduring source of Palestinian frustration and humiliation -- also barely rates a mention. Beginning in March 1993, the closures ranged from general shutdowns that prevented Palestinians from reaching jobs in Israel to more far-reaching ones that prevented Palestinians from leaving their town or village. Even when closures were not in effect, Palestinians traveling anywhere outside their town or village were subjected to often humiliating Israeli checkpoints. Such was the reality of Palestinian life under Oslo, and so it should not be surprising that Palestinians enthusiastically -- if naively -- went to battle against Israel to exact a measure of revenge.

YESTERDAY'S MAN?

Can Arafat deliver peace with Israel? No, say Karsh and the Rubins, and they are likely right. Whether this is because, as they maintain, Arafat views peace as a "Trojan horse" with which to destroy Israel or because no credible Israeli leader will ever again negotiate directly with him is beside the point. Frankly, the Palestinians themselves will probably be better off when Arafat passes from the scene and the best and the brightest among them are allowed to come to the fore in a democratic Palestine.

Being Yasir Arafat: A Portrait of Palestine's President Foreign Affairs

With or without him, the shape of a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians has largely been negotiated already, and someday talks should be able to pick up where they left off in Taba in January 2001. The eventual settlement will have three major elements. First, as all parties already recognize, the 1967 borders must provide the basis for the borders between Israel and Palestine (with the addition of minor and mutually agreeable adjustments and land swaps, such as the annexing of some major settlements by Israel in exchange for other lands going to Palestine). Second, Jerusalem must be shared in some credible fashion between the two states, becoming the internationally recognized capital of each country. There are already many smart ideas in circulation about how such sharing might work, and the parties themselves have already committed to some version of a shared Jerusalem. The third element -- an equitable settlement of the refugee issue -- is the hardest emotionally for both sides, and the one on which the least progress has been made to date.

Although no agreement on refugees was ultimately reached at Taba, it was there that Israel seriously discussed possible solutions for the first time. The key to future success lies in the astonishing survey results recently published with great courage by Shikaki and his colleagues.¹ Surveying Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza, Shikaki found that once their right of return was recognized, the vast majority of them would prefer to settle not in Israel but in the new Palestinian state. These data provide solid empirical evidence for what analysts have argued for years: that the solution to the refugee issue lies in Israel recognizing the Palestinian right of return, but Palestine primarily implementing it.

As the scholar Ian Lustick has argued, without any moral equivalency implied, in this context Israel and the Palestinians would do well to study Germany's formal apology to the Jews following World War II. That statement was minimalist enough not to unduly anger ordinary Germans but was accepted and transformed by Israel to serve its own domestic and international political purposes. Devising such a formulation for the Palestinian refugee issue is certainly not outside the bounds of human imagination.

Once the refugee issue is addressed squarely along with territorial concerns and Jerusalem, Palestinians and Israelis should be able to move past both 1948 and 1967 -- and Arafat himself, for that matter -- into a new and better future.

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